RECOVER YOUR HUMANITY
Genesis 32:22-32
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In his excellent book, The Second Journey, Frederick Buechner writes - "All theology, like all fiction, is at its heart autobiography... and what a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he can the rough and tumble of his own experience with all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and expressing in logical, abstract terms the truths about human life and about God that he believes he has found implicit there." (p. 1)

The Old Testament lesson this morning is a story about a strange event that happened one night a very long time ago. The man to whom it happened became convinced that implicit in it was quite a bit about human life and about God. Listen now for God's word to you.

> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" and there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el, limping because of his thigh.

Someone once told me that hearing that story is like standing in a museum looking at a broken fragment of what was once a beautiful pottery vase, knowing that it was once something of great significance, but not knowing exactly why. The story is at least 3600 years old. It was told for generations before it was written down. It is a family treasure. 3600 years ago it helped people understand who they were, and, if we listen carefully I suggest that it can tell us who we are. Because it is scripture, we are invited into this story: after we've admired and analyzed its literary merits, actually to read ourselves into it.

It is not an edifying, Sunday School tale. As a matter of face the one who is its subject was a crook. There is in Jacob a character deficiency which is consistent, expressive and nasty. Early on Jacob talks his twin brother Esau out of his rightful inheritance and then perpetrates a shameful fraud on a trusting, elderly father. Isaac, who is about to die, and is nearly blind, needed to bless his eldest son. Jacob, with an assist from his mother, having already cheated Esau, now impersonates him, wears his clothes, disguishes his voice, makes his arms feel hairy - like Esau - and gets away with it. Then, because Esau threatens to kill him, Jacob flees to his uncle Laban. There he lives and works for 20 years, marries Laban's daughter Rachel, fathers many children, and systematically steals Laban's sheep. When the size of Jacob's herd becomes suspiciously large he begins to think, interestingly, about leaving for home - which he does, under cover of darkness. His wife steals the family valuables on the way out.

How good and pleasant when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. It is like a blessing - an ultimate benediction - life forevermore. Words are not adequate: it does require dancing and imagining and remembering.

The Wednesday morning headline announced "Christians Won't Talk to Syrians." What they don't want to talk about, of course, is Mt. Hermon - Lebanon - where God's dew still falls and God's sons and daughters have been gleefully killing one another for hundreds of years. There is judgment here for those strong enough to stand under it. Mark Twain was expert at weaving it into his comic - tragic vision fo our humanity.

> He wrote: "I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, goat, kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such succeses that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Moslem...a Buddhist...along with a Baptist missionary...And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

There is judgment here because the record is not good. "Religion," Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "is the last battleground between God and humanity." And nowhere is that clearer than the dismal role religion has played in the finely honed art of war. The Rev. Ian Paisley and his evangelical friends are a major part of the problem in Northern Ireland. What transpires in Lebanon is not a theological struggle, but the people who are killing one another are religiously identifiable.

There is judgment here because the day before the "Christians Won't Talk" headline the newspaper announced new solidarity between China and the United States as a result of Secretary of Defense Weinburger's visit; and then spelled out that new and curious definition of solidarity - the results of which will be a better equipped Chinese army, more favorable balance of payments and happy American weapons manufacturers.

In counterpoint to the sweetness of the Biblical imagery, we must tune in the sounds of the world. Many of those sounds are warnings:

> Norman Cousins: "Our number one problem is the increasing possibility of nuclear war. Our number two problem is that our best minds aren't working on our number one problem."
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> Terry Sanford, President, Duke University: "The end mission of the people of the United States is not to build an armed camp to face the other armed camps of the world. And yet that is what we are doing. We can do better than that." (Time Magazine, June 1983)

Judgment...Warning...and Challenge. People of good will, on World Communion Sunday are challenged, I submit, to hear the Gospel; to listen to it at precisely that point where it challenges personal behavior, attitudes, priorities. The challenge today is to acknowledge the simple truth that the first priority in the Bible is reconciliation, healing, bringing together that which life breaks apart. The essential harmony

Lewis Thomas is a very astute physician who writes very good books and in his most recent he discusses the need for medical students to learn their limits. "Every young doctor should know exactly what it is like to have things go catastrophically wrong, and to be personally mortal. It makes for a better practice." (The Youngest Science, p. 232)

Shakespeare wrote it into one of the greatest dramas of all time, King Lear. At the end Lear has lost his crown and his kingdom and is about to be hauled off to prison. His compatriot, Gloucester says, "O, let me kiss that hand!" Lear responds, "Let me wipe it first: it smells of mortality." Lear becomes human when he asks forgiveness of Cordelia and is "every inch a king" finally, when he knows his limits, his humanity. So we - in relationship - are never more loving, which means more human, when we can acknowledge our imperfections, stop performing and simply be: or, when appropriate, we can even ask forgiveness of one another. We are, all of us, every much a man or woman when we know our limits, our humanity.

This ancient gem of a story is suggesting that one of the gifts our religion ought to be giving us is a sense of our own humanity. One of the functions of religion in the human drama, if I'm reading this story accurately, is to help us learn what it means to be human: we limp, we are limited. How sad then, when religion presumes the precise opposite: when commitment to one religion, one theology, one church, means regarding all the alternatives as utterly wrong. Senator Kennedy ended up, by accident as it happens, on the podium of Jerry Falwell's Liberty College recently, and said something important: "What's wrong with the Moral Majority is it's assumption that any position other than its own is immoral."

Religion, by its very nature, ought to make us more tolerant, not less; more willing to accept alternate opinions, not less; more willing to forgive human failure, not less. Religion ought to teach us what it means to be part of the human condition, not provide the rationale for judging and condeming the rest of the race.

The second thing a lesson in our humanity teaches is that God is not limited. Now there are some very fancy and sophisticated ways of saying that: God is omnipotent, immutable, eternal, unchanging: God is the ground of all being; the first cause. Or, more simply, God is not subject to the limitations to which we are subject. In the ancient story Jacob wrestles with the stranger all night without pinning him, without even learning his name. In the Hebrew idiom, to know a name is to control. Jacob never learns his attacker's name; is never quite sure if he is wrestling with God or an angel or a demon or simply a belligerent passer-by.

It is the intent of Judeo/Christian religion to remind us that our God cannot be pinned down, cannot ultimately be named by controlling, limiting human vocabulary. We need that reminder because of a tendency in religion to try to do that very thing. We religious types are the ones who become convinced that we can wrestle with God and pin him: that what we believe about God is all there is to know about God. The God of this ancient story, however; the God of the Bible, is shrouded in mystery, acts unpredictably, does unlikely things. The God of the Bible is unlimited and part of the recovery of our humanity is to know that.

In the meantime God will accost us, ambush us, force us to contend, struggle, wrestle. The philosophers know that sooner or later each of us wrestles at least with the idea of God. For some of us the wrestling is in the form of a gnawing doubt about a firm, long-term set of conviction. "Can I be wrong on this one? Am I alone, finally? Is there anyone there?" And for some who think they have resolved the issue and can live without faith the wrestling will be a confrontation with the nagging possibility of God that will not let them alone.